

University of Groningen

Let's talk about stress

Harmsen, Ruth

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.107895492](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.107895492)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Harmsen, R. (2019). *Let's talk about stress: beginning secondary school teachers' stress in the context of induction programmes*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen.
<https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.107895492>

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CHAPTER 6

Discussion

Teaching is a highly stressful profession (Johnson et al., 2005; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015), and many beginning secondary school teachers leave the profession early (attrition). In recent years, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science funded projects to stimulate the implementation of induction programmes at Dutch secondary schools. Considering the supportive nature of these programmes, it is not surprising that they offer high potential to support beginning teachers and decrease their stress levels. However, no research has investigated these programmes yet, and therefore, the main aim of this dissertation was to investigate beginning secondary school teachers' stress in the context of induction programmes.

To do so, we developed a framework based on the transaction model of stress (Lazarus, 2006; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), used throughout this dissertation (see p. 7–10 for a full description of this framework). According to this framework, outcomes such as attrition are the result of an interaction and appraisal process between the person (i.e., the teacher) and his or her environment. To investigate beginning teachers' stress in the context of induction programmes, we formulated four research question:

- 1) How can beginning teachers' stress be measured?
- 2) Do beginning teachers' stress, teaching behaviour and attrition relate?
- 3) What are the longitudinal effects of induction arrangements on beginning teachers' stress?
- 4) What are the differences between highly stressed teachers who leave the profession within five years of teaching (leavers) and highly stressed teachers who stay (stayers)?

These research questions were answered in four studies (Chapters 2–5). This chapter summarizes the results of these investigations. Next, the general conclusions and the importance and meaning of the results are discussed. Finally, limitations, suggestions for future research and implications for practice are presented.

6.1 Summary of the results

6.1.1 How can the stress of beginning teachers be measured?

The studies presented in Chapter 2 primarily focussed on how the stress of beginning teachers can be measured, in line with research question 1. First, we explored which stress causes recur consistently in teacher stress literature to determine essential stress elements for measuring beginning teachers' stress. Second, we assessed existing (stress) questionnaires that include these stress causes. None of these questionnaires covered all the beginning teacher' stress causes. Third, we expanded an existing stress questionnaire by adding additional teacher stress causes. The QEEW (van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994) served this purpose; it has been proven robust and is widely used to measure general stress across various professions internationally. Fourth, we examined the suitability of the original QEEW stress scales for beginning teachers' context, using a sample of 356 beginning teachers from 52 secondary schools in the Netherlands. We found that the majority of the original QEEW scales were relevant for use in this context. To make the questionnaire concise, we applied Mokken scaling item

reduction (Mokken, 1971) to the relevant scales, which resulted in a reduction of nearly half of the items of the original questionnaire. Fifth, we added more items regarding relevant teacher stress causes to the questionnaire. To ensure these additional scales were also concise, we executed item reduction on these items as well, which resulted in the QEEW-BT. To double-check whether the QEEW-BT is an appropriate instrument to measure beginning teachers' stress, we used a different sample of 143 beginning teachers from 61 schools in the Netherlands. The main conclusion of this chapter was that the QEEW-BT is an appropriate, reliable and valid instrument to measure beginning teachers' stress in terms of the level of experienced stress causes and stress responses.

To date, the QEEW-BT has only been used to measure Dutch secondary school teachers' stress. Assuming that the work of teaching is organized differently in each country, more research in other countries is needed to examine the reliability and validity of this instrument in other countries. Nevertheless, this stress questionnaire includes all the relevant stress causes found in earlier stress research from various countries, so we expect it should generalize to other settings.

6.1.2 The relationship of beginning teachers' stress causes, stress responses, teaching behaviour and attrition

The study in Chapter 3 focused on research question 2 by exploring the relationships among beginning teachers' stress causes (e.g., high psychological task demands, negative pupil aspects, negative social aspects), stress responses (i.e., tension, negative emotions and discontent), teaching behaviour and attrition. We asked 143 beginning teachers to complete the beginning teachers stress questionnaire described in Chapter 1. In addition, we observed their teaching behaviour using the International Comparative Analysis of Learning and Teaching (van de Grift, 2014) instrument. Results showed relationships between stress causes and stress responses. Specifically, the more psychological task demands (e.g., many teaching hours) and negative pupil aspects (e.g., student misbehaviour, poor relationship with students) the beginning teachers experienced, the more tension (e.g., rumination) they experienced. Also, the poorer the relationship with pupils and the more pupil misbehaviour a beginning teacher experienced, the more negative emotional reactions (e.g., feeling lack of pleasure in work), tension and discontent (e.g., lack of organizational commitment) the beginning teachers experienced. Finally, the more beginning teachers experienced negative social aspects (e.g., poor relationship with colleagues, supervisor) and negative pupil aspects, the more they experienced discontent.

In addition, we observed meaningful relationships between stress responses and teaching behaviour. Beginning teachers who experienced more negative emotions during work also showed significantly lower teaching behaviour in such aspects as creating a safe and stimulating learning climate, maintaining efficient classroom management, having clear instruction and being able to activate their students' learning. Finally, we found that beginning teachers' high levels of discontent

were related to leaving the school or the profession. In conclusion, beginning teachers' stress influences their teaching behaviour and attrition.

6.1.3 Longitudinal effects of induction arrangements on beginning teachers' stress

The study described in Chapter 4 focused on research question 3 by investigating the longitudinal effects of induction arrangements on beginning teachers' stress. We examined the influence of (1) workload reduction, (2) supporting effective teacher behaviour, (3) supporting school enculturation and/or (4) supporting professional development on stress experienced at the end of the beginning teachers' first teaching year. We also investigated the longitudinal influence of these induction arrangements on the increase or decrease of the beginning teachers' stress over the course of three years of teaching. Data from 393 beginning teachers, collected over three years at three points, served as a basis for this analysis. They indicated that beginning teachers who perceived workload reduction during their first year experienced less psychological task demands, negative social aspects, tension, negative emotions and discontent at the end of their first school year.

In addition, higher levels of perceived opportunities of school enculturation during the first school year corresponded with lower levels of discontent over the following two teaching years. Higher perceived levels of support of effective teacher behaviour during the first school year also corresponded with lower levels of negative emotions and discontent at the end of the first school year. Only support for professional development was not found to be effective. As possible reason for this finding, Kessels (2010) argues that most beginners do not focus on professional development but rather on their well-being and survival. Although the data indicate that most induction arrangements were effective in reducing stress, and therefore should be included in induction programmes, the quantitative nature of the study did not reveal how beginners experienced their work as stressful or how they actually coped with the experienced stress.

6.1.4 Differences between highly stressed leavers and highly stressed stayers

To gain a deeper understanding of how beginning teachers experienced and coped with stress, the study in Chapter 5 qualitatively explored the experiences of highly stressed beginning teachers who stayed in the teaching profession (stayers) and highly stressed beginning teachers who left (leavers), in line with research question 4. This group of highly stressed teachers provided insights into why the work appears stressful and how those teachers cope with the stress. The main reason they experienced teaching as stressful was their insufficient experience with the tasks required of them: planning their lessons, designing the curriculum, developing tests for their students and correcting these tests. Their lack of experience meant it took them longer to do these tasks than the time allocated, which resulted in high costs in terms of personal time and energy, despite the schools' organized induction programmes. These teachers' stories showed that such programmes can only be effective if they are

conducted in the way intended. Respondents reported that workload reduction was operationalized as reductions in nonteaching hours or compensation in salary. Intervision meetings were scheduled at times that some teachers were not available, and some coaches did not have the time to coach the beginners. A stress cause that applied to the teachers who left the profession related to the students, including poor relationships with the students and difficulty with classroom management.

Regarding the way the teachers cope with their stress, we find that both stayers and leavers had access to a variety of resources from the induction programmes, but they differed in how they made use of those resources and also their perceptions of their availability. The stayers experienced and used more resources compared with the leavers to prevent themselves from getting too stressed. The resources mentioned by the beginners included setting boundaries and being proactive with working hours, classroom behaviour and emotional involvement, physical exercise (all stayers exercised, and none of the leavers did), social networks, coaching and the quality of relationships with students. Striking in this respect was that several teachers reduced the number of working hours, indicating that a full-time job is difficult to maintain. The study also illustrated that for beginning teachers, having good relationships with students is one of their most important resources, crucial for retention. The stayers described their good relationships with their students as compensating for the stress of teaching. In contrast, the leavers, who described relationships with (some of) their students as poor, related that this negative relationship led to negative emotions, discontent and ultimately attrition. In addition, stayers experienced a strong supportive social network at their school. They all reported having (several) people (e.g., colleagues, supervisor, coach) to consult with, when necessary, regarding the challenges they experienced.

In addition, beginner teachers' beliefs regarding their self-efficacy and about teaching and student learning differed. The teachers who stayed had a strong sense of self-efficacy that they could do the work, and they also enjoyed it; in contrast, the ones who left had a low sense of self-efficacy. Regarding the beliefs about teaching and student learning, the stayers described teaching more as the organization of student learning and were more focussed on trying to understand how the students learned. In contrast, the leavers described teaching as an act of transmission of knowledge and had strong external attributions when it came to student learning; they considered it mainly the student's responsibility to learn.

6.2 Overall conclusions

6.2.1 Stress

As mentioned previously, teaching is a stressful profession, especially for beginning teachers – specifically due to the heavy workload, the negative social aspects and student behaviour (in line with Borg & Riding, 1991; Clunies-Ross, Little & Kienhuis, 2008; den Brok, Wubbels & van Tartwijk, 2017). For most beginners, despite their preparation, teaching tasks (e.g., planning lessons, teaching,

designing and marking exams, being a class mentor) were either new to them or ones with which they had little experience. Therefore, it took them longer to complete these tasks. When a beginning teacher has the full responsibility to prepare for and teach multiple classes a day but has little experience doing so, it causes stress. Being a teacher requires a certain level of professional (knowing how to teach) and organizational (knowing how to work in a school) literacy that most beginners do not have yet. Both beginning teachers and schools seem to underestimate the complexity and duration of mastering the profession of teaching.

6.2.2 Relationships

Another main conclusion refers to the relationships among stress, stress causes, stress responses, teaching behaviour and attrition. Research examining these relationships is scarce, and those studies that do address this relationship commonly investigate attrition from an ‘intention’ perspective instead of an ‘actual’ perspective. Focussing on the main stress causes, our research shows that heavy workloads led to feelings of tension among beginning teachers and that negative social aspects led to feelings of discontent among beginning teachers. Moreover, negative student aspects (student misbehaviour and poor relationships with students) led to negative emotions, tension and discontent. In addition, discontent as an attitudinal outcome is strongly related to leaving the teaching profession (attrition), and negative emotions are related to less effective teaching behaviour. In other words, the experience of high stress among beginners should be taken seriously because of its consequences. Our results are in line with the general labour research of van Veldhoven, Taris, de Jonge, and Broersen (2005), who found that quantitative/qualitative demands (e.g., workload) relate primarily to psychological strain outcomes (e.g., tension), whereas lack of support (e.g., negative social aspects) is primarily related to attitudinal outcomes (e.g., discontent). Our results are also in line with Skaalvik and Skaalvik’s (2011) finding that higher job satisfaction among teachers relates to a lower motivation to leave the profession.

6.2.3 Induction programmes

In general, induction programmes can help reduce stress among beginners. Workload reduction resulted, such that beginners experienced fewer negative social aspects and fewer psychological task demands. Workload reduction, stimulating school enculturation and support for effective teaching behaviour decreased beginning teachers’ feelings of discontent. In addition, supporting beginning teachers’ teaching skills decreased their feelings of negative emotions during work. However, induction programmes are only effective if they are implemented and executed as intended. Our data show that workload reduction was operationalized in some schools in such a way that the actual teaching workload was not reduced or the coach was not available; as Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Korstjens and Volman (2014) stated, coaching can only be effective when a coach takes sufficient

time to guide the teacher and takes the teacher seriously. In other words, an induction programme in the school is not sufficient per se; the induction arrangement elements must be executed as they were intended.

6.2.4 Coping

Regarding the responses to stress or how beginners cope with stress, beginning teachers found a variety of resources, such as setting boundaries regarding student behaviour, having good relationships with students, being proactive, setting emotional boundaries, reducing workload, meetings with or observations of a coach and making use of social networks. These findings are in line with other research (Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Stokking et al, 2013). Newberry and Allsop (2017) also found that the timing and intensity of challenges like poor relationships with students matter; they stated that it is not the challenge of the job but the structure of the social-professional support that determines whether teachers stay or leave. In this vein, Kelchtermans (2017) argued that professional core relationships (e.g., relationships with students) operate as ‘double-edged swords’, as the most important sources for positive job outcomes (e.g., motivation) but also for negative job outcomes (e.g., leaving the profession).

In addition, stayers’ and leavers’ beliefs regarding their self-efficacy and the nature of teaching and student learning differ. Highly stressed teachers who decided to stay in the profession had a strong sense of self-efficacy, in contrast with those who left. Moreover, they saw teaching in terms of organizing the learning of their students, trying to understand their students in terms of what they as teachers could do to help (Hattie, 2012). In contrast, the ones who left saw teaching more in terms of a transmission of knowledge by telling and showing, such that the students were to blame if they did not learn. Although we explored beginning teachers’ beliefs among only nine teachers, it seems reasonable to assume that such beliefs about teaching and student learning play a role in how teachers perceive their work.

6.3 Limitations and recommendations for research

We acknowledge several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings of this dissertation. A first limitation relates to the representativeness of the samples. In Chapter 2, we used two samples, both of which included mainly schools in the northern regions of the Netherlands. The comparison of these samples with the national population profile showed that the distribution of the denomination, urbanization and SES percentages differed. Furthermore, in the sample used in Chapter 3 the percentage of female teachers is slightly higher (57.3%) compared with the national secondary school teacher populations (46.7%; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2014), and the

percentage of qualified teachers is higher (100%) in the sample than in the national population (88.2%). We do not view these differences as serious problems; the results are similar to previous research findings and therefore seem to represent beginning teachers' stress well. Respondents in all samples also participated voluntarily, so it is unclear if beginning teachers who agreed to participate may behave differently from those who did not. Especially in light of their stress, it might be that severely stressed teachers could not find time to participate. Fortunately, in the last study we were able to include nine teachers who experienced a high level of stress who shared their experiences.

A second limitation pertains to the operationalization of the induction programmes at school. If a school offers an induction programme, it does not automatically mean the arrangements are implemented correctly, nor does it mean that beginning teachers make use of the induction arrangements. In Chapter 5, we found that some schools offer beginning teachers more salary or workload reduction on nonteaching tasks instead of offering a 20% workload reduction on their teaching tasks. In addition, some beginning teachers were mentors of a class in their first year; others could not attend intervision meetings, because they were organised at times when they had other obligations. In addition, some beginning teachers had a coach, but conflicting teaching schedules and other obligations made it difficult to meet on a regular basis. All these findings should be considered when interpreting the findings of Chapter 4. In Chapter 4, we investigated the influence of the individual induction arrangements on beginning teachers' stress, but we only considered whether the induction arrangement was offered to the beginning teacher, not whether and how often they made use of it or how the induction arrangement was designed. Further research should consider not only whether the induction arrangements are offered to the beginning teachers but also whether and how much they use this support.

A final limitation relates to the timing and frequency of gathering the beginning teachers' data. In Chapters 2–4, beginning teachers' data were gathered once a year, at the end of the school year, when teachers might experience higher stress levels that might not represent the stress they experienced throughout the year. In addition, stress levels vary within the same period; therefore, caution should be taken when interpreting the results of Chapter 4 in which we investigated the increase/decrease of stress over time. In Chapter 3, we found that negative emotions and less effective teaching skills are related. However, teaching behaviour and stress were measured during the same period, so we cannot be sure whether negative emotions led to less effective teaching behaviour or vice versa. More research is needed to establish the causality of these relationships.

6.4 Practical implications

We draw on previous research and the four studies in this dissertation to give suggestions to secondary schools regarding how they might support beginning teachers in their schools, to reduce their stress levels. In addition, we offer suggestions for beginning secondary school teachers related to ways they

might cope with the challenges of their teaching job to manage their stress levels.

6.4.1 Implications for schools

Schools should implement induction programmes for beginning teachers. Previous research has already shown that these programmes are highly valued and well received by beginning teachers (Draper, O'Brien & Christie, 2004; Hodkinson, 2006) and that they are beneficial for improving teaching behaviour, beginning teachers' commitment and student achievement (e.g., Helms-Lorenz, van de Grift & Maulana, 2016; Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The results of this dissertation add to current knowledge by showing that the induction arrangements can also reduce beginning teachers' stress.

Workload reduction, which aims to ease the job demands of beginning teachers, has a powerful impact on decreasing beginning teachers' perceived workload and negative social aspects. Heavy workload and negative social aspects are two of the three main stress causes for beginning teachers. Workload reduction might be implemented by reducing beginning teachers' teaching hours (not nonteaching hours or a salary increase instead of workload reduction). For example, the school could offer at least a 20% workload reduction on teaching hours for the first three teaching years. Considering the conclusions in this dissertation that for many beginners the work is very stressful, because it is all new to them, we strongly recommend that school leaders implement this 20% workload reduction for beginners. As another concrete recommendation, beginners should not mentor any class in their first years of teaching; instead, they should focus on the core task of teaching.

We also recommend implementing induction arrangements for effective teaching behaviour and supporting school enculturation, both of which decrease discontent among beginning teachers. In addition, support for effective teaching behaviour decreased the levels of negative emotions among beginning teachers. High levels of discontent related to leaving the teaching profession, and high levels of negative emotions related to less effective teaching behaviour. Therefore, supporting beginning teachers by implementing these induction arrangements seems important. Support for effective teaching behaviour can be implemented by letting a trained coach or mentor observe the beginning teacher's lesson and providing him or her with feedback. Furthermore, having regular (fixed) appointments between the beginning teacher and the coach to discuss the beginning teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy and teaching and students' learning and the challenges they face are critical. Supporting school enculturation, which involves making the teacher familiar with the school culture and climate, can be implemented by providing background information to these teachers regarding schools' culture and climate.

A complete induction programme often includes support for professional development. Chapter 4 showed though that this induction arrangement did not reduce the stress of beginning teachers. As Kessels (2010) argued, most beginners largely ignore professional development; rather,

they focus on their well-being and survival. In addition, in Chapter 5 it became clear that only two beginning teachers found the intervision meetings organised at their school useful. Some teachers, especially those who had no problem with classroom management or individual students, found the intervision meetings useless and time consuming. They would have liked to use that time more efficiently to meet their heavy workloads. Two other beginners could not attend the meetings due to other obligations. Therefore, schools might make attending intervision meetings optional so that beginners who benefit from these meetings can make use of them, while others who do not feel the need to attend can use their time more efficiently.

6.4.2 Implications for beginning teachers

We strongly recommend that beginning teachers maintain a healthy work–life balance. As our studies show, coping with heavy workloads can be achieved by (1) setting clear boundaries on the number of working hours (e.g., stopping after contracted working hours), (2) taking time to recharge (e.g., not working in the weekends, making exercise part of a routine), (3) using social networks (e.g., sharing experiences with other beginning teachers, colleagues, friends, family) and (4) receiving workload reductions at school. Coping with negative student aspects can be achieved by (1) setting clear boundaries in the classroom regarding student behaviour, (2) seeking help from the coach/mentor (e.g., being observed and receiving feedback) and (3) using social networks to seek help and share experiences. Finally, using social networks can also help with other negative social aspects (e.g., issues with parents, colleagues, supervisor) that beginning teachers might experience.

